

Cultural Policy in the Arab Region

Fifth periodic report
January 1 – June 30 2014



Current developments of cultural policy in the Arab Region

General Summary Report

Current developments in cultural policy

Algeria | Morocco | Mauritania
Yemen | Egypt | Palestine
Syria | Lebanon | Jordan

September 2014

The fifth periodic report on cultural policy in the Arab region monitors current developments in 9 Arab states in the period between January 1st and June 30th 2014. The report consists of a general overview of the cultural policy scene on a national level in the Arab countries covered as well as developments in the work carried out by the National Group for Cultural Policy in each of the countries.

The report includes news and updates from all the East Arab countries (Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan), West Arab countries (Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania), in addition to Egypt and Yemen. This report monitors the politically charged atmosphere in Mauritania as well as in Algeria following presidential elections, and the consequent protests carried out in the street, with a similar outcry from independent candidates. The report also follows up Egypt's cultural institutions' adoption of a political discourse compliant with the ruling authority, and reveals the



amount of the Moroccan government's budget for supporting cultural activities.

Key positive developments are not to be overlooked, as the report also observes changes such as a unified Ministry of Culture in Palestine for the first time in seven years, Yemen being elected as a member of the Islamic World Heritage Committee during the 8th Islamic Conference of Culture Ministers organized by ISESCO, in addition to the opening of the 'Memory of Mauritania' Center, which is an independent cultural foundation concerned with collection, maintenance and valuation of audio-visual heritage of Mauritania. In Lebanon, an agreement for the creation of 'National Virtual Museum of Modern Art' was signed, a first-of-its-kind museum established in order to promote local art.

Challenges and obstacles in the Arab region, as the report observes, seem to be large-scale and persistent in continuity, whether it is ignoring the rights to cultural diversity as expressed by the 'Don't Touch my Nationality' movement to protect black rights in Mauritania, or at the level of censorship and prohibition which was memorably exemplified in an incident in Casablanca when rapper Al-Haqed was prohibited from holding a press conference to promote his new album. Similarly the Egyptian Prime Minister imposed a ban on the film 'Halawat Rooh' preventing its screening in cinemas due to what he called 'moral reasons', after the film had passed the censorship board. This is in addition to harassment, prosecutions and violations against journalists in Yemen, Lebanon and Jordan under the pretext of publishing false news and information.

Within the same context this report also presents the dangers of the currently turbulent cultural security situation such as in Yemen where artifact smuggling operations are widespread, and in Syria where cultural heritage and complete archaeological sites are listed to be in danger. The report ends with the violations cultural workers are subjected to from various parties and the increasing dangers that activists are faced with. Also the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in areas of Northern Syria has imposed laws that violate freedom and especially women's rights as well as fundamental civil rights.

The methodology used in compiling this report was direct contact with organizations and activists in each of the surveyed countries. Researchers at *Ettijahat* had developed 'worksheets' pertaining to each country, which were closely examined and revised by the National Group and ultimately used to guide researchers at *Ettijahat* regarding the main priorities and most important changes to be addressed in this

report. The researchers also made reviews of most National Group strategic plans, such as the West Arab states' National Groups' efforts to draft a bill for a cultural policy in the Maghreb, Egypt's National Group's preparations to launch a campaign to demand a 1% allocation of the yearly budget to supporting culture, as well as finalizing a series of new research projects on the priorities of cultural activity in Syria by the core Syrian National Group.

Toward the end of the time period covered by this report preparations for launching an internet site for a regional database for cultural policy (<http://www.arabcp.org>) will be completed, and the site will be launched as a collaborative project between *Cultural Resource* (al Mawrad al Thaqafi) and *Ettijahat: Independent Culture*.

Mauritania

President re-elected and youth meetings on culture organized, international call for complete eradication of slavery, and movements organized to demand rights for African language speakers.

The first half of 2014 was a politically turbulent period for Mauritania. The President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz had decided to run for another term in office amidst a wave of criticism from opposition leaders, intellectuals and civil society activists who sent an open letter to the President on the 4th of June demanding he postpone the presidential election.

Under the political storm taking place there weren't any major changes to cultural policy; rather that particular period was marked by consultations and discussions. In March, ten workshops under the title 'Youth Meetings with the President' were organized, which consisted of open meetings between the President and youth groups to discuss current and urgent topics. One of the workshops held was titled 'Workshop on Culture, Heritage, Religion, Society and Sport' and concluded with the following recommendations: establishment of a higher council for culture and the creation of a panel of writers and scientists who would follow through with the project; development of the Mauritanian Institute for Scientific Research; establishment of a publishing and distribution house as well as the Institute for Fine Arts; creation of an award for young creatives; establishment of a Palace of Culture to be used as a cultural space and a meeting headquarters for intellectuals; development of the National Library with a new collection of books and sections; ratification to complete procedures that meet UNESCO's Convention on cultural diversity; establishment of local museums and a National Center for Children's Culture; creation of a National Theatre troupe and a National Center for Cinema; as well as establishment of a Higher Council for Youth, which is the only recommendation among those previously mentioned on which work has already begun, and the law to establish the Higher Council is to be further discussed by the Council of Ministers during one of the first meetings of the new government.

In addition, the 'Memory of Mauritania (Mohamed Ould Saleck)' opened the doors of its new center, an independent cultural foundation concerned with collection, conservation and valuation of Mauritania's audio-visual cultural heritage.

On a different note, the Mauritanian Prime Minister emphasized that freedom must not be at the expense of security, stating that the level of freedom does not have to come at the expense of citizens' security and their property. Under this pretext Al-Mustaqbal, an association that offered prayer practice and education, was shut down. The Islamic charitable association was headed by Mohammed Hasan Ould Al-Dadou who happens to be one of the leading figures associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Mauritania and in the world.

On February 27 the United Nations called on Mauritania for more action to completely eradicate slavery, whilst praising the government's achievements in its efforts to address the problem so far. The UN Special

Rapporteur said in this regard: 'The government is yet to translate its promises into action to make stronger strides in ending slavery and fully implementing laws and policies.'

Moreover Mauritania's national language day celebrations were an opportunity for the 'Don't Touch my Nationality' movement, one of the most active movements to defend black rights in Mauritania, to organize a stand-off in front of the presidential palace to renew demands for compulsory local African languages classes in all educational stages as well as more space for linguistic diversity in local media outlets. The protests were in response to the recent imposition of Arabic as the official language for all administrative transactions in Nouakchott's nine councils as well as within government offices, a decision that caused offence to black activists.

It is worth noting that Mauritania holds the Chairpersonship of the African Union for 2014, which strengthens its political and cultural position in the region.

The National Group for Cultural Policy



The National Group for Cultural Policy in Mauritania began its activity in 2014 by creating a permanent secretary who would coordinate the Group's administrative work, draft and translate its reports, and oversee the Group's membership list as well as complete its database.

The Group's activity in the first half of this year was as follows:

- 1- Introductory meetings to discuss the project and the necessity of having a national convention on cultural policy. The Group organized 40 meetings with cultural activists, heads of independent cultural organizations and artists as well as meetings with government officials and directors of cultural centers, in addition to meetings with presidential candidates for 2014 in order to include culture in their election platforms and public speeches.
- 2- Workshops on cultural management for workers in the cultural field in order for them to gain experience. In total two cultural workshops were organized, one taking place in the city of Nouadhibou and the other in the capital Nouakchott. 75 young men and women who work as heads and managers for cultural and artistic associations attended.
- 3- As for the media and advertising side of the project, a Facebook page was created alongside a local mailing list containing addresses of artists, intellectuals and cultural workers. Membership cards were also widely distributed to engage a larger amount of workers in the cultural field as well as engage local press in order to expand the Group's presence in media (Radio Nouakchott, SaharaMedia FM, National TV...)

Algeria

Change in the Ministry of Culture despite the renewal of the Presidential pledge, international organizations call for the Algerian authorities to comply with the values of the UN Human Rights Council

The first half of 2014 witnessed the re-election of President Bouteflika for a new presidential term, in an election boycotted by many authorities and parties who called it a sham. A group of intellectuals, writers and media figures also signed a statement 'for a revised structure' which called on cultural and political elites to exert their role, maintaining that "the matter requires a firm stand opposing the tampering carried out on behalf of institutions against these institutions themselves, and on behalf of democracy against itself."

Electoral platforms were void of any cultural vision which prompted a number of Algerian organizations to issue a statement condemning what it called the disregard of culture and the interests of intellectuals in the six electoral campaigns.

A sit-in was organized by the Berber cultural movement to demand the recognition of the Amazigh language as an official administrative language after the Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal had announced "the constitutionalization of the Amazigh language is not on the government's agenda."

In mid June following the new draft of the constitution that had been issued alongside a call from the Prime Minister to discuss it, 36 political parties boycotted these consultations while the Presidential office stated that 114 political and civilian camps participated in them.

It is worth noting that the constitutional amendment draft has overlooked the local cultural field, without any mention of the work of the cultural sector or any Article related to that field. The draft also ignored many important points regarding the 'Rally for Culture and Democracy', including "administrative divisions and formalizing the Amazigh language, as well as organizing institutions and governance on the basis of separation of powers, in addition to institutional reform."

On a different note, condemnations in regard to defending human rights were directed at Algeria on behalf of five international organizations involved in the defense of human rights, among them Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, considering Algeria to be one of the countries that fails to respect human rights. Algerian authorities were urged to comply with the UN Human Rights Council's values and to allow experts from the UN as well as NGO's involved in defending human rights to visit the country.

UNESCO has set up a regional center in Algeria for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in Africa. The center would play a key role in raising abilities to protect intangible cultural heritage in the region.

Algeria's 'Site Art' association proposed converting the city's abattoirs into art spaces, in view of a ministerial decree issued in March to set up a commission that listed the abattoirs as "a historical site that



إن الفن هو الأثر الخالد،
والثقافة هي النهر الرافد

L'art est ce qui compte,
la culture est ce qui importe

Art is what counts,
culture is what matters

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serves as witness to Algeria's industrial era." A petition by Algerian artists to the public authorities had gathered 700 signatures of support to create a space dedicated to arts and culture at the current site of the city's slaughterhouses. The previously mentioned ministerial decree has since been revoked by the new Prime Minister, the reason according to activists was the inability to apply sufficient pressure by intellectuals to carry through the project.

After the new Algerian government was elected, the appointed Minister of Culture Ms. Nadia Labidi stressed the necessity of bringing the legacy of Arab-Islamic art into all cultural projects completed in preparation for the city of Constantine's role as the 'Arab Capital of Culture 2015'.

The new Minister also made fundamental changes within the Ministry, abolishing six major frameworks. Among these changes the director of the Algerian Cultural Influence Agency was sacked. In addition the Minister organized several meetings with cultural workers, including a meeting on cinema and another with artists. Some intellectuals described these meetings as bureaucratic with no specific objectives and consider the Minister to face important challenges, most notably addressing the issue of national festivals, which drains the Ministry's budget. It is worth noting that the previous Minister's lengthy term in office lasted 12 years.

The National Group for Cultural Policy

The Group working on cultural policy in Algeria organized two workshops on conducting cultural projects. The first workshop, held in Algiers in April, was conducted by Moroccan trainer Adel Elsaadani whose experience was of benefit to 25 young men and women. The second workshop took place in Constantine in June and was conducted by Tunisian trainer Habib Belhadi. The city of Oran will host the third workshop on facilitating cultural projects this coming September.

The working Group will also be preparing to organize the first Maghreb meeting on cultural policy which will bring together Groups working on cultural policy in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania.

The Algerian Working Group on Cultural Policy member Dr. Ammar Kassab published two studies, the first titled 'Cultural Legislation and Organization in Algeria' and the second titled 'Comparative Study of Cultural Policy in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt', in collaboration with Moroccan researcher Donia Ben Sulaiman. The studies were published by the Culture Resource organization.

Morocco

Official support for cultural activity, dedication to African culture in Morocco, and persistence of cultural piracy

The first half of 2014 in Morocco was marked by official support for cultural activities; the Ministry of Culture made an announcement in May regarding the support it allocated for cultural and artistic projects in the following sectors: theatre, fine arts and visual arts, book publishing, and music and choreography. This support is part of a new initiative the Ministry has announced as part of its goals to renew funding mechanisms for arts and culture through allocating and monitoring a budget of 40 million dirhams (approximately 4,668,000 USD).

Funding was distributed as follows: the theatre committee gave its approval to 31 projects amounting to an estimated sum of 1,810,000 dirhams. In the visual arts sector 24 grants were received at an estimated amount of 2,362,000 dirhams. For the support of projects related to book publishing the respective specialized committee approved 178 grants with an estimated 3,182,100 dirhams of funding. As for the project proposals in the music and choreography sector, 25 grants have



been ratified with about 3,713,360 dirhams allocated in funding.

In a similar context the Ministry of Communications, custodian of the film industry, announced its program of support for festivals and film events. The specialized committee studied 32 funding proposals and approved grants to 26 festivals and events. The amount of funding granted during that session was 307,500,000 dirhams in addition to an amount of 743,000,000 dirhams allocated to 5 festivals in a special session – a total of 1,050,500,000 dirhams.

It is worth noting that Morocco hosts more than 53 film festivals and events, most prominently the Marrakech International Film Festival which alone receives 40% of the total funding budget while the remaining amount is distributed among the remaining film events (less than 7% of the total budget was distributed among 40 film events in 2013).

The first half of this year also saw various activities and initiatives related to Morocco's African heritage, including the opening of the 17th edition of the African Film Festival in Khouribga with presence and participation from 17 African states. This was in addition to hosting the 20th International Publishing and Book Fair in Casablanca in February 2014 in honor of the Economic Community of West African States, which consists of fifteen member countries. The event was part of an initiative that seeks to consolidate Morocco's vision regarding its African heritage. Gnaoua Music Festival was also held from June 12th to June 15th 2014 in Essaouira under this year's slogan 'The Africa to Come'.

In terms of cultural events, the Ministry of Culture organized an international conference on the national cultural statistics information system, attended by a group of professors, experts and representatives from various organizations and national research centers. UNESCO's office in Rabat also organized a 'training course on the conservation of intangible cultural heritage in Adagir' as part of the initiatives seeking to actualize a 2003 agreement related to the conservation of intangible cultural heritage on the national level. In addition the Ministry of Culture organized a full day workshop on 'Educational System Reform in Music Academies' with summaries and guidelines related to reforming the educational system in conservatories being presented towards the end of the day.

In Rabat a new edition of the Mawazine Rhythms of the World music festival took place from May 31st to June 7th 2014 with the participation of 1500 artists from different parts of the world, drawing 2.62 million viewers. The 2014 edition was also marked by 35 concerts taking place in Rabat as well as in Salé. This year's edition did not face the usual wave of protests; intellectuals note the reason for that is the fact that most of the previous opponents of the festival have moved their concerns towards the governmental stalemate, as well as the arrest by the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs of a mosque preacher who addressed the festival in his sermon.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of cultural piracy continues to target Moroccan creative output and threaten its existence. Recently a high quality copy of the Moroccan film 'Road to Kabul' bearing the Moroccan Cinema Centre's (CCM) watermark appeared on YouTube, making the film the Centre's first original copy of a Moroccan film to be leaked. Despite the CCM and the film production company's attempts to remove the leaks, after YouTube had responded to their requests, new uploads appeared on other channels.

When it comes to initiatives aimed at strengthening legislation and laws regulating cultural practice it is worth noting the legislative proposal submitted by Moroccan MP, actor and artist Yassin Ahjam which serves to change and put into effect Law number 71-99 related to artists, the amendment of which aims to improve Moroccan artists' professional and social position.

It should also be noted that Casablanca's authorities banned rapper Mouad Belghouat, known as El-Haqed, from holding a press conference to present his new album.

The National Group for Cultural Policy

The Moroccan National Group for Cultural Policy was involved in various activities and meetings in the first half of 2014

- The Group held a full-day workshop titled 'On Moroccan Cultural Policy Horizons' in January 2014 in Casablanca. The full-day workshop aimed at starting a preliminary discussion that would result in the adoption of a method of action, within the frameworks of the drafted document on cultural policy in Morocco. The meeting was attended by cultural practitioners and activists working in the field of cultural policy in Morocco, Egypt, Algeria and Mauritania. This workshop aims, as quoted in its description, to open up a wide-ranging debate on cultural policy in Morocco and seeks to create a cultural policy able to preserve the authentic elements of Moroccan culture while at the same being open to its surroundings in the Arab world and beyond.
- The Moroccan National Group for Cultural Policy participated in the Conference on Cultural Policy that took place Berlin in February 2014, at the initiative of 'Culture Resource' organization and Hildesheim University.
- The Group also participated in the activities of the first Regional Forum on Local Cultural Policy in April 2014 in the city of Agadir. The forum operates as a framework to communicate and exchange visions and data around topics of cultural work, in addition to suggested plans for revitalization between policymakers and workers in the cultural field as well as between the relevant state departments and civil society.

For the first time since its inception in 2011, the Moroccan Group For Cultural Policy received a financial grant worth 30 thousand dirhams (approximately 3500 USD) from the Ministry of Culture to fund some of its programs in cultural policy.

Egypt

Politics dominates cultural life, and a period of sparse cultural initiatives endures

During the first half of 2014, on January 18th Egypt's new constitution was adopted after a referendum was held at the beginning of the new year, that was boycotted by several political parties and factions. This coincided with the country's period of transition up until the presidential elections and Abdel Fattah al-Sissi's inauguration on June 4th, which also were boycotted in vast numbers.

In the meantime former Minister of Culture Saber Arab stated during the transition period: "We will not support any candidate running in the presidential elections and will not be a medium of advocacy for any political party or ideology, for we are a ministry of the state and we follow its national programs." In addition, the authoritative body of Cultural Palaces emphasized its position in regard to banning the use of its sites for advertising campaigns for presidential and parliamentary candidates.

These positions were laid out within official discourse, as well as becoming evident in terms of practical application. Egyptian institutions and state media adopted a clear political line, encompassing a the ban on the formation of religious political parties; adopting prison sentences issued against intellectuals such



as poet Omar Hatheq, novelist Karam Saber and lawyer Mahienour El-Massry; plans to enact new laws restricting freedoms, such as the law placing social networking sites under the Ministry of Interior's surveillance; repeated confiscation of creative work under the pretext of religion, as well as the trial of journalist Mohammed Fahmi and his colleagues on charges of terrorism.

The Egyptian Prime Minister also banned the film 'Halawat Rouh' from screening in cinemas in Egypt for what he called 'moral reasons' after the film had passed the censorship bureau, which led to the resignation of the censorship board's head.

The period mentioned was characterized by the following cultural initiatives: the first initiative was launched by nine Egyptian ministries, including the Ministry of Culture, and was titled 'Egyptian Initiative for Culture' carrying various slogans with regard to optimum use of available resources, nurturing talent and making culture accessible to everyone, as well as building bridges of communication between young people, among others.

This is in addition to the 'Beautiful Egypt' initiative describe by the Ministry of Culture as "coming face to face with challenges and conspiracies contrived against Egypt through protest by art, consciousness and culture." The initiative engages three of the Ministry's sectors of Cultural Palaces, Cultural Production and the Cultural Development Fund, which have been brought back through the cultural convoys initiative organized jointly by the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Youth.

The regional program 'Culture Med', funded by the European Union, also held consultations with representatives of Egyptian authorities and cultural activists with the aim of identifying priorities and developing strategic plans related to Egyptian cultural policy, to be implemented in partnership with the 'Culture Med' program during its extended term of four years.

Under the previous Ministry of Culture's administration, a number of Egyptian activists and intellectuals called for a conference titled 'For a Culture Befitting Egypt' as part of a campaign to fight corruption in the Ministry and to demand the Minister's resignation, against the backdrop of scepticism surrounding the suitability of awards given at the Book Fair. The statement published by intellectuals read, "Egypt's cultural malaise has manifested itself through the absence of a clear vision for cultural policy alongside near universal domination of chaos and indiscriminate practices, and an almost total tyranny of favouritism, cronyism and vested interests in all aspects of Egyptian cultural performance at home and abroad."

A new Egyptian government was formed following presidential elections and included Gaber Asfour as Minister of Culture who announced the addition of 10% of revenues from the Ministry of Antiquities to the Ministry of Culture's budget and began implementing the Al-Samer Land project, an eleven-storey complex that includes a cinema and a theatre, and reduced the National Theatre's ticket price. Asfour also made an agreement with the minister of finance to regain 90% of the Art House Theatre revenues for funding activities that had previously been relocated to the Ministry of Finance. Furthermore, Asfour signed a protocol of cooperation between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Communications to further develop technological infrastructures and convert the Culture Ministry's paper filing into an electronic system.

National Group for Cultural Policy

The National Group for Cultural Policy in Egypt set the following new general goals for its yearly strategic plan:

- Cultural and literary development of educational curricula
- Developing a summary of proposed cultural policy
- Mapping cultural institutions and cultural operators
- Launching a campaign to demand the allocation of 1% of the budget to culture
- Launching the new phase of the ‘Cultural Policy for All Egyptians’ campaign
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The Group also began the implementation of the Cultural Policy for All Egyptians campaign in collaboration with the Culture Resource organization. Part of the project was the release of the short film ‘Cultural Policy for All Egyptians’ which came in the third phase of the media campaign that also includes designs for publications and popular slogans. A day of photography was also organized, titled ‘Let’s take a photo’... a campaign that aims to raise awareness among citizens with regard to their cultural rights, as well as to gather popular support to draw a new cultural policy for Egypt.

Aside from this, a campaign of action titled ‘Local 10’ was launched, with the aim of training a number of youth from deprived areas with few cultural opportunities, to raise awareness of the public ownership of public space (so long as it’s not used against the law). The Group met in May and decided to expand its membership in the coming period by accepting new members, so that 30% of the Group’s members are based outside of Cairo for decentralization purposes.

Yemen

Yemen elected member of Islamic World Heritage Committee (Iesco), and Yemeni heritage sites targets of looting, destruction and smuggling

Yemen did not witness any fundamental changes in terms of cultural policy in the first half of 2014; most of the events that took place focused on the topics of heritage and antiquities. The 8th Islamic Conference of Culture Ministers organized by ISESCO elected Yemen as a member of the Islamic World Heritage Committee, which deals with inscribing historical sites and landmarks of the member states to the Islamic Heritage list and offers recommendations to the World Heritage Committee for acceptance and inscription of archaeological and natural sites.

In addition to this an agreement between the USA and Yemen for the restoration of the National Museums’ tower was signed. The agreement



consisted of provision for the restoration of the National Museum's tower, and the establishment of a children's museum in the same building with the support of the US ambassador's fund. The project's estimated cost is approximately 160,000 USD.

Also under discussion was planning the 2014-2016 executive program for bilateral agreement for cultural cooperation between Egypt and Yemen, focusing on the restoration of mummies, the fight against smuggling of antiquities, as well as training and rehabilitation of Yemeni cadres in different cultural fields.

In a similar context, the National Committee for UNESCO condemned the recent lootings and destruction of archaeological sites in Socotra. The statement issued by the Committee considered what had happened in Socotra a cultural, ethical and scientific crime *par excellence* due to the fact that Socotra is one of the most important nature reserves inscribed on the World Heritage List. The statement also condemned what it described as everyday occurrences of looting, theft, smuggling and destruction of Yemen's tangible and intangible heritage, from the far north across to the far south, by antique and manuscript dealers as well as by warlords and armed militias.

Yemeni authorities also seized seven Quranic manuscripts from a smuggling operation. In another incident, Yemeni authorities also seized an operation to smuggle three statues and other items such as a copper bowl, a lead and a copper earring, a copper jug and various other artefacts dating back to different historical periods.

Elsewhere, Human Rights Watch called upon Yemen to adhere to pledges it has made, which include ratifying the Rome Statute to join the International Criminal Court and forming a factual investigative committee regarding violations of rights, as well as adopting measures to promote gender equality.

In March the Ministry of Culture organized the first national campaign to raise awareness and education about copyright and related rights, in order to shed light on the risks of piracy and create a culture of respect toward copyrights and various measures in this regard.

Several trials newspapers and journalists were put on trial under the pretext of spreading false news and information, such as the trial of Naef Hassan, editor-in-chief of the Al Sharea newspaper, and editor-in-chief of Al Montasaf newspaper Wael Amin Al Waeli.



The Yemeni government also nominated the city of Ta'izz to compete for the Arab Culture Capital 2020, and the prime minister's office approved a budget of 21 billion Yemeni riyals (approximately 98 million

USD) for the next four years during which development projects in the city would be implemented to qualify it for Arab Culture Capital.

National Group for Cultural Policy

The Group carried out a campaign to raise awareness on cultural policy and rights. The campaign was launched during a press conference held alongside an exhibition of the campaign's posters. In addition, around 35 thousand campaign posters were printed which carried slogans such as: 'it's my right to listen to music'; 'culture is not only for intellectuals, it's for all Yemenis'; 'it's my right to sing'; 'it's my right to act'; 'art teaches us freedom and teaches us humanity'; and 'it is every person's right to enjoy art and culture and to make one's art for all people.' These posters were displayed around the city's streets and public spaces.



The Group also organized meetings with some members of the committee to draft the constitution to propose the Group's vision with regard to constitutionalizing culture.

Syria

State of archaeological sites and cultural infrastructure continues to deteriorate, stark differences between areas controlled by the regime and the opposition, and increasing religious extremism

The first half of 2014 was not so different from the past three years, with minimal cultural work by the government within the areas controlled by the Syrian regime and continued civil, cultural and relief work in areas controlled by the opposition. This was in addition to a complete lack of any form of cultural or civil activity in areas controlled by the so called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Cultural activity in the areas controlled by the regime aims to maintain the functionality of institutions and to attempt give the impression that life goes on as usual. The cultural effort in these areas does not intend in any way or form to develop cultural activity or care for its development; rather it aims to continue business as usual no matter what form or consistency.

This period saw several performances held by the Theatre and Music Directorate as well as a seasonal program at the Damascus Opera House. The General Organization for Cinema produced several films and the National Symphony Orchestra continued holding its monthly concerts. The first half of this year also marked the return of TV drama productions in Damascus after a substantial drop in series-making last year.

The overlying message these ongoing activities send out is that being in the midst of the current crisis Syria it will be able to overcome it, and for this reason a large number of artists have profited from the crisis in Syria and have gained grants or occupied high positions within the cultural field, after many had fled or refused to work with the regime.

On a different note many cultural institutions have laid off a large number of employees who do not hold the same views as the regime, and up to the present actress Leila Awad, Zaki Kordello, Mehیار Kordello and writer Adnan Zirai are still detained in the regime's prisons; artist Youssef Abdelke, among a long list of other names, was previously detained.

In areas controlled by the opposition however there have been significant developments, the most prominent recent one being the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) taking over areas in northern Syria.

ISIS has imposed laws that violate freedom, women's rights and fundamental civil rights. The organization has also persecuted and assassinated a number of activists and journalists, in addition to applying Shari'a law and forcing repentance or punishment on many people and organizations. ISIS has spread in areas of north-eastern Syria and many western provinces in Iraq.

As for other areas controlled by the opposition, the situation has remained characteristically unchanged for the past three years. Many new organizations and civic groups have emerged (journalistic, artistic, relief, awareness) and operate under difficult conditions with limited resources, especially in besieged areas. These organizations often do not have consistent funding, structured management nor written strategies. Their concerns mainly focus on the promotion of civic values and rule of law, non-violence and social change within Syria's civil society as well as defending freedoms and providing studies and research on Syria, in addition to revitalizing independent art.

The challenge facing these initiatives include the necessity of systemizing their work to a minimal degree, in order to progress from a reactionary phase to one of action. Unfortunately this particular civil movement is going through a significant and noticeable decline due to the proliferation of arms and weapons on the one hand, and the expansion of religious extremism on the other, causes which have begun to gradually diminish the role of these groups.

This period has also witnessed the continuous relocation of Syrian cultural activity and movement to neighbouring countries. Cities such as Amman, Beirut, Istanbul and Cairo are now acquainted with an organized Syrian cultural movement (in fields such as music, theatre, fine art, cinema, etc.). Various initiatives and organizations have also been established, that deal with relief, development, and education and have helped set up cultural centres and clubs, schools and curricula. They also attempted to create a substitute for the educational and cultural aspects of life that Syrians lack in neighbouring countries.

The violent battles taking place in Syrian territories have put Syrian cultural heritage in danger. Specifically, more than 10 thousand open-air archaeological sites in Syria were listed as in danger, being exposed to potential destruction or large-scale looting. In May, UNESCO condemned the demolition of the Eliyahu Hanabi synagogue in Damascus. Previously on June 31st 2013, UNESCO had inscribed Syria's six World Heritage Sites to its List in Danger, these sites are: the Ancient City of Aleppo, the Ancient City of Damascus, the Ancient City of Bosra, Qala'at Salah El-Din Citadel, the Site of Palmyra, as well as ancient villages of Northern Syria. In addition, a large amount of other cultural infrastructure has been converted into military headquarters, warehouses or shelters.

The National Group for Cultural Policy

The core National Group for Cultural Policy in Syria has undertaken discussion and analysis of a survey on priorities of cultural work that was completed in 2014, with the participation of around 100 researchers. The results will be used as an instrument to develop a document regarding priorities of cultural work in Syria. Several studies and research projects within the same framework were conducted and managed by *Ettijahat: Independent Culture*, namely:

- Study on the role of art and culture in peace building, conducted by Syrian researcher Rama Najma.
- Study on cultural mechanisms and culture production in times of conflict: Syria, Iraq and Lebanon; in order to construct scenarios around prospective and potential cultural change, conducted by Dr. Marie Elias.

The Group is also working on implementing the following steps in the second half of 2014:

- 1- Preparing the document on 'Priorities of Cultural Work in Syria', overseen by the core National Group.
- 2- Fully establishing the National Group and a calling for a forum to brief independent Syrian cultural operators, and building on its results
- 3- Gathering support for the protection and adoption of Syrian culture, as a priority of interlinking social and political elements in the current period, through a promotional film and an internet site

Palestine

A unified Ministry of Culture for the first time in seven years, and continued condemnation of normalization and violations of free speech

The first half of 2014 ended with tragic events unfolding in Palestine due to the Israeli aggression against the Gaza strip, disrupting all forms of life, including culturally and socially.

In June, the first Palestinian unity government in seven years was sworn in, ending institutional division between the West Bank and Gaza. Rami Hamdallah was appointed Prime Minister and Ziad Abou Amr Minister of Culture. The Central Bureau of Statistics issued a special report on cultural work in 2013, its findings include:

The number of operating cultural centers in Palestine reached 658; 575 centres in the West Bank, and 83 in Gaza. These cultural centres organized about 9.4 thousand cultural activities; 8.9% of these activities consisted of seminars, 10.2% of lectures, 63% courses and workshops, 15.9% art shows, and 2% of exhibitions. In comparison, in 2012 up to 9.5 thousand cultural activities took place. Regarding participation in cultural activities in 2013, the number of participants was up to 502 thousand, that is 399 thousand participants in the West Bank and 103 thousand participants in Gaza. Additionally the number of working museums in Palestine was 13, 9 of them in the West Bank, and 4 in Gaza. There were also 8 theatres active in Palestine in 2013, 5 in the West Bank, and 3 in Gaza.

In addition, the completion of workshops to build the cultural fund's strategy for 2014-2016 was announced, focusing on six cultural sectors: cinema, literature, music, fine art, folklore, and theatre. The Minister of Culture issued a decree to form a collective of Palestinian heritage associations which includes the Ministry of Culture as a member, in addition to organizations working in the cultural heritage field with the aim of unifying visions, plans and programs.

Elsewhere the Standing Committee of Arab Culture, which stems from the Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, emphasized at the end of its meetings in Tunisia its support for Palestinian efforts with regard to resisting the Israeli occupation's authorities to transform religious places into Israeli tourism spots, as well as the importance of preserving Jerusalem's legal status.

The policy against normalization continues, with the Ministry of Culture in Gaza condemning the participation of Arab artists from some Arab countries in a painting exhibition in the occupied city of Haifa in April. The Ministry stressed its complete rejection of all forms of normalization, especially cultural. In Ramallah a performance by an Indian troupe led to protests from the audience as the same troupe's performance also took place in Tel Aviv, leading to accusations of cultural normalization, which resulted in the Indian actors in Ramallah clarifying that their performance in Tel Aviv was not held in cooperation with any department of Israeli authorities. Palestine also saw several cultural events taking place internally or in collaboration with external parties, most prominently the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival in April which hosted 29 troupes from 13 countries and 140 participating artists who gave 34 performances in Ramallah's localities as well as in al-Bireh, Jenin, Nazareth and Jerusalem...

With regard to freedom of expression and press freedom, the first half of 2014 witnessed more than fifteen cases of assault, arrest, detention, and harassment against journalists and photographers by the Israeli occupation forces. Among those affected were Muawiya Nassar, Mohammed Abu Jahisha, Abdel-Rahman Younis, Mohaisen Amarin, Rima Sandouka, Moumen Shabana, and Nader Baybars, along with many others.

Palestinian authorities in the West Bank also arrested journalist Munther Khawaldeh, raided the house of journalist Atef Abu Al-Rab and attacked him, and detained journalist Mohammed Eshtewi for hours, in addition to several other violations by authorities in Gaza against journalists.

Lebanon

Press freedom in danger, numerous cultural cooperation projects with the European Union, and Syrian refugees culturally prominent

Political stagnation and the presidential vacuum, which pushed numerous Lebanese civil society groups, university students and trade unions to demand an end to the political void were the defining features of the first half of 2014 in Lebanon. This state of affairs was reflected by cultural policy, which did not witness profound changes.

The 'Maharat' foundation in collaboration with UNESCO's regional office and the Lebanon Civic Support initiative organized an event titled 'A Free Press Contributes to Development' with the aim of highlighting challenges to freedom of expression in Lebanon, during which it launched a campaign for media reforms.

Social media activist Jean Assi was sentenced to two months in prison for Tweets about President Michel Suleyman he posted last year, after a Lebanese judge had said that the Tweets bordered on 'defamation and slander'. It is worth noting that media law in Lebanon is ancient and does not recognize any means of publishing on the internet.

The Directorate for General Security's censorship department banned an episode of the program 'On a Different Wave' from airing, which featured theatre director Lucien Bourjeily and tackled prior censorship of art and performance in Lebanon. Radio station 'Voice of Lebanon' refused the General Security's request and decided to broadcast the pre-recorded episode. Bourjeily's play 'Will It Pass or Not?' was banned last year by the censorship department and was nominated for the arts award at the Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression awards 2014.

In addition, Lebanon's Court of Publications issued a ruling against Mohamed Nazzal and Al-Akhbar newspaper and issued the two a fine of 39 million Lebanese pounds on charges of libel, slander, vilification and dissemination of false news after the paper published an investigative piece titled 'Judges and Officers Protect a Drug Network: The Son of a Powerful Man Escapes Punishment'. It should be noted that Judge Randa Yaqzan who filed the lawsuit against Nazzal and Al-Akhbar was demoted two ranks by the judicial high disciplinary council.

On a different note the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education issued a decree to include the Rahbani brothers' contributions to culture in educational curricula. In addition the minister of culture signed an agreement with the vice president of the University of Balamand to launch the 'National Virtual Museum of Modern Art', a first-of-its-kind museum, promoting artistic heritage in Lebanon.

In light of the absence of a national strategy for the protection of Lebanese architectural heritage, there is ongoing controversy between heritage buildings' owners who consider them their private property and the Ministry of Culture which remains immobile without making any clear law or introducing adequate compensation standards regarding these buildings.

As for EU - Lebanon cultural cooperation, the European Union's new cultural program 'Med Culture' held consultative meetings with representatives of Lebanese ministries and Lebanese cultural activists. These were aimed at jointly identifying priorities and coordinating accompanying action plans, implemented in partnership with the 'Med Culture' throughout the four years of the program's duration.

The first steps of the 'Development of Associations in the Culture and Creative Industry' (CCI) project were completed after beginning preparatory meetings for the project in June. The project is being

implemented by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and funded by the European Union and Italian government.

The European Network of Cultural Centres published a call to submit proposals for projects that would promote cultural exchange between the EU and Lebanon. This call for submissions seeks to support local art and creative output by offering limited funding without being limited to a specified topic. This call is open to graduate artists no older than 35 who are living and working in Lebanon.

In addition, UNESCO's regional office in Beirut in partnership with the Ministry of Culture and other groups organized an educational visit to the National Museum, with the participation of 1000 sixth grade students from Lebanese public schools. This aimed to introduce them to the Hague Convention and develop their sense of ownership of archaeological heritage at risk in the event of conflict.

The number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon continues to increase, both in refugee camps and in Lebanese cities. One of the consequences of this is that a number of Syrian artists and intellectuals who settled in Beirut have started practicing their work through dance and theatre performances as well as exhibitions, or cultural relief activity mostly based in Syrian refugee camps. A cultural centre in the Shatila Palestinian camp was built by the Basma wa Zaytuna association, and Al Jousour organization in partnership with Sawa for Syria are developing educational curricula and establishing centres for studying and education. *Ettijahat: Independent Culture* has developed a 'cultural relief' program with artistic and development goals, to be carried out through several artistic and cultural workshops inside refugee camps in Tripoli and the Bekaa.

Jordan

Return of centralized culture, Jordan ranked down to position 155 out of 197 states on press freedom list

Jordan did not witness any significant changes in terms of cultural policy during the first half of 2014. Tafilah was chosen as Jordanian Cultural City for 2014 part of a 'cultural city' project launched by the Ministry of Culture in 2007. The project entails a Jordanian city being chosen as cultural city every year in an effort to disseminate culture in the provinces. This year however the project returned to being managed by the Ministry of Culture and thus being recentralized, despite the initial goal being to decentralize culture and transfer management to the project's host city.

Separately, the regional program funded by the EU 'Culture Med' program held consultations with Jordanian Ministry representatives and cultural activists on cultural policy, creative economy, and ways to promote cultural cooperation. The meeting concluded with a consensus on the Ministry of Culture's need to have a greater role in supporting this sector, through acting as a facilitator rather than a producer and distributor of cultural activities.

At the beginning of the year, Human Rights Watch published in its report that Jordanian lawmakers must make fundamental reforms in 2014 to repeal or amend laws that impose unacceptable restrictions on freedom of expression. Throughout 2013 Jordanian authorities persecuted persons with vaguely worded charges such as "insulting an official body", 'undermining the system of political governance' and 'disturbing relations with a foreign country', to stifle nonviolent freedom of speech.

Jordan was also mentioned by the US organization Freedom House in its Freedom of the Press Index, whilst dropping to 155th position out of 197 countries, as a state that does not have a free press.

In January, the Jordanian Writers Association and the Plastic Artists Association issued a statement condemning the assault on members of a Jordanian musical group by staff of Al Hussein Cultural Centre.

The statement read that the incident “is an expected result of strategies of intimidation and intervention that are well-known in cultural policy circles, a behaviour unbecoming of culture or its institutions, and is an extension of a strategy of marginalizing and blockading culture and creativity.”

General Remarks concerning the work of the National Groups

- Despite difficulties in the start-up phase in some National Groups, the trend of exchange of expertise between Groups seems to be one of the most important features of the period covered by the report, as in the case of expertise sharing between the North African Groups and coming closer toward the completion of regional collaborations.
- Focus on training and capacity building in the field of cultural management is among the top priorities of National Groups in Mauritania and Algeria.
- Most of the Groups were able to overcome the deviations experienced in previous years’ strategic planning.
- There are indications of some Groups’ achieving progress in structure and representation as in the case of Mauritania, and the ability to secure financing from official parties as is the case for the Moroccan Group, both of which increase the chances of the sustainability of these Groups.
- Some Arab National Groups continue to adopt a policy of public access throughout their work, as well as launching promotional campaigns for cultural rights as in the cases of the Yemeni and Egyptian National Groups, as well as in Syria
- Representation within National Groups remains one of the challenges to be addressed in order to consolidate the Groups’ credibility; the National Group in Egypt is moving towards decentralization after it made the decision to expand membership by inviting new members, so that 30% of the Group’ s members are based outside of Cairo, therefore loosening centralization.

